

Natural History, Slavery, and Race

THOMAS JEFFERSON'S ATTITUDES TOWARD African Americans and the institution of slavery have always excited and inflamed the passions of historians, reformers, and the general mass of decent people. In a typically infuriating set of contradictions, Jefferson detested slavery, but despite his impassioned condemnation of slavery in *Notes on the State of Virginia* and his *Autobiography*, he owned and used slaves. He did not free his own slaves (at least the majority of them). He adamantly rejected the notion of a general emancipation and, equally conspicuously, failed to find effective alternatives. And still, all his life, he condemned slavery and warned of dire consequences should the problem not be solved.¹ Many of these contradictions stemmed from Jefferson's "scientific" estimation of the character and intelligence of black people, whom he considered to be "a race lower in the scale of being" than other races, while he considered American Indians to be part of "us."

Given that *Notes* was his scientific and political manifesto, it would have been surprising if he had not used it to deal head-on with the most contentious issue of his day. Slavery and race together constituted a difficult and, in the end, unresolved issue for Jefferson as a person, as a farmer, as a lawmaker, and as an intellectual. As his writings show, Jefferson was fascinated by racial differences among people, particularly whether the physical and intellectual characteristics of "negroes" were fixed or susceptible to change. The answers had huge potential consequences for his views on human nature and the American body politic.

Science, in this case, however, instead of providing him with answers only embedded him ever more firmly in contradiction. On the subject of